

## TUTORING CREATIVE WRITERS IN THE WRITING CENTER

Havva Zorluel Ozer  
Indiana University of Pennsylvania  
[h.zorluel@iup.edu](mailto:h.zorluel@iup.edu)

### Abstract

In this article, I report on the results of a mixed-methods survey research on writing center tutors' attitudes towards tutoring creative writers. I analyze thirty-two tutors' perceived level of confidence in tutoring poetry, fiction, and creative non-fiction writing, examine the background factors that influence their perceptions, and describe their self-identified concerns about tutoring such writing. I conclude the article with a discussion of the implications for tutor training, arguing for the value of genre awareness pedagogy and improvisation practices to help tutors work with any genre in writing centers.

"Nearly everyone who writes likes – and needs – to talk about his or her writing, preferably to someone who will really listen, who knows how to listen, and knows how to talk about writing too." (pg. 439-440.)

—Stephen M. North, *The Idea of a Writing Center*

Writing centers stand as influential sites of learning that respond to the enduring needs of writers North observed over decades ago. In the center, tutors work with writers who seek one-on-one support in writing in a broad range of contexts. The National Census of Writing data show how far writing centers have come in tutoring writing that goes beyond the traditional term paper to include a wider variety of genres such as PowerPoint or other software presentations, posters, new media writing, discussion lead planning, etc. No matter what they work with, tutors "can help reduce the students' anxieties, self-doubts, and insecurities that can lead to writer's block, a sense of failure, and poor self-esteem" (Murphy and Sherwood 16) through the establishment of a positive interpersonal relationship with writers. Tutors can help writers to reflect on, generate, and organize ideas, think about their options, and develop control of their writing processes (Gillespie and Lerner). Given the value of the services writing centers offer, the scholarship suggests that writing centers can become an essential resource for creative writers who can benefit from sharing their works in progress with highly skilled, dedicated, and enthusiastic writing tutors (Cassorla; Hime and Mowrer; LeBlanc; Pobo). While creative writers, like many other writers, are welcomed in writing centers, a review of the literature demonstrates that there is limited empirical data that document the work tutors perform with this particular writing center clientele. In this article, I build on the extant foundation of knowledge through an

examination of writing center tutors' attitudes towards tutoring creative writers. In what follows, I first provide background on the intersection between creative writing and writing center pedagogies. I then review the scholarly conversations surrounding the topic of tutoring creative writers drawing on the writing center literature. Following that, I describe the survey research I conducted and report on the findings of this research. I conclude the article with a discussion of the implications for training tutors toward working with any genre in the writing center by incorporating genre awareness pedagogy and improvisation practices into tutor training.

### Creative Writing and The Writing Center

The history of creative writing programs dates back to the early twentieth century when creative writing entered the curriculum and was accepted for academic credit at the University of Iowa (Bishop; Mayers). From that day forward, creative writing programs have gradually developed in other higher education institutions across the country (McGurl). Throughout the history of creative writing instruction, workshop has been the dominant pedagogy in creative writing classrooms (Bizzaro). The workshop pedagogy, in which students submit one or more pieces of their work for classroom critique, continued to be the primary pedagogy in creative writing instruction until around 1990s when teachers of creative writing began to question its underpinnings (Bizzaro; Leahy et al.; Mayers). The problems with workshop pedagogy included but not limited to the little attention given to "work in process, or revision" (Leahy et al. 14) because it was traditionally designed as a product-oriented practice (Mayers).

To move creative writing instruction beyond the reliance on a single teaching method that eschewed the process of writing, creative writing experts took on explorations into innovative pedagogical approaches and practices. For instance, in their edited collection "Creative Writing Pedagogies for the Twenty-First Century", Alexandria Peary and Tom Hunley brought together creative writing and composition scholars to offer neoteric alternatives to the workshop pedagogy. As a possibility, some authors suggested the adaptation of writing center pedagogy in creative writing

classrooms to replace the product-centered workshop approach with a more process-oriented practice. Kate Kostelnik argued that writing centers' conversation-between-peers approach is a powerful practice that can provide creative writers with opportunities to reflect on their texts in progress and engage in productive conversations about their works. This not only implies the potential of writing center pedagogy in creative writing instruction, but also calls attention to the fact of writing centers being effective sites of collaborative learning for creative writers to get assistance with their writing.

With the rise of the creative writing programs in the U.S. higher education institutions, the Purdue Online Writing Lab (OWL) announced that more creative writing students would be expected to visit writing centers to receive feedback on their writing (Tutoring Creative Writing Students). Although there isn't any empirical evidence that shows whether there is a growing demand for tutorials on creative writing, it would not be unusual to encounter creative writers in the centers because, like many other writers, creative writers often seek a community in which they could discuss their writing and receive feedback to improve as a writer. In this regard, the services that writing centers offer can respond to the needs of creative writers, by providing them with a community of audience who will listen to and talk about their work. Tutors can help creative writers focus and stimulate their thoughts, draft and revise their texts, and appreciate the process-based nature of writing activity (Cassorla; Le Blanc; Pobo). As Kenneth Pobo remarked, any question that tutors ask creative writers about their writing, for example, why they chose a certain word, what they tried to communicate in a stanza, or what ideas they wanted to convey in the piece, would be helpful to improve the work in progress.

While the writing center scholarship acknowledges that tutors can support creative writers' growth as skillful writers, the discussions of how to tutor creative writers remain inconclusive in the literature. On the one side, there are scholars who argue that creative writers' needs differ from "those of the typical writing center conferee" (LeBlanc 1) and that tutors must be aware of the peculiarities of "creative writing, which are not identical to the global issues of thesis-driven writing" (Hime and Mowrer 1). On the other side, there are scholars who take a perspective that "what applies in freshman composition, technical writing, journalism, and advanced prose writing also applies in creative writing" (Pobo 5). To Pobo, for example, all types of writing focus on similar rhetorical questions (e.g. Who is the audience? What is the purpose? How is content

dealt with? How are vocabulary and phrases used?) and creative writing is no exception. Jennifer Hime and Karen Mowrer, however, consider tutoring creative writing as "a sensitive task that goes beyond mere clarity, organization, and style" (1). Consequently, there is a diversity of opinions as to the methods of tutoring creative writing. Despite such diversity, writing center practitioners are consistent in their agreement that writing centers are important resources for creative writers who have much to gain from the services that the centers offer.

To facilitate the growth of creative writers, there are some materials available for tutors' use in the writing centers. For instance, Hime and Mowrer provide a useful guideline that presents eight questions to consider when tutoring creative writers. These questions guide tutors' discussions with creative writers as well as foster dialogic exchange and effective communication in tutorials. Additionally, Purdue University's OWL provides helpful resources for working with creative writing students (Tutoring Creative Writing Students). The OWL particularly addresses beginning poetry and fiction writers. It defines the challenges that beginning poets and fiction writers frequently encounter in their writing and suggests strategies to address these challenges in tutorials. It contains examples to illustrate possible tutor responses to different tutoring situations, and offers useful materials such as handouts, books, web sites, PowerPoint presentations to guide discussions with creative writing students.

The literature reviewed thus far addresses the topic of tutoring creative writers through discussions of what role writing centers can play in addressing creative writers' needs, in what ways tutoring creative writing is similar to or different from tutoring traditional essay writing, and which methods tutors can use to help creative writers. When it comes to empirical work, however, reviewing the writing center literature reveals a scarcity of research in current scholarship. In one, and to my best knowledge only, empirical inquiry, Leah Cassorla studied tutor attitudes toward tutoring creative writers and found that the tutors were most comfortable with tutoring creative non-fiction and fiction writers, whereas they were least comfortable with tutoring poetry writers. Of 71 tutors, two claimed that they received specialized training for tutoring creative writers and many stated that a combination of tutoring experience, workshops, and their creative writer identities represented the training they had for tutoring creative writers. Reporting a gap between tutor reports on the need for specialized training and the canonized theory that claims the opposite, Cassorla pointed to a need to further investigate tutor attitudes for a better

understanding of the ways in which tutors respond to situations where they are expected to talk about and offer advice on creative pieces. The current study is a response to this call, bringing the perspectives of tutors on tutoring creative writers.

In attempt to scrutinize the research on the tutoring of creative writers published in flagship journals in the last decade, I reviewed the articles in the *WLN: A Writing Center Scholarship* from 2010 (volume 34, issue 4-5) to 2020 (volume 44, issue 9-10), *The Writing Center Journal* from 2010 (volume 30, issue 1) to 2019 (volume 37, issue 2), and *Praxis: A Writing Center Journal* from 2012 (volume 9, issue 1) to 2020 (volume 17, issue 3). Unfortunately, I found no systematic, empirical documentation of tutoring creative writers in these publications. As afore-reviewed, only a handful of studies addressed the topic of tutoring creative writers in the writing center literature, but these studies are outdated, being published over a decade ago. In the current study, I strive to contribute to the existing body of knowledge on this topic by describing and analyzing writing center tutors' attitudes towards and concerns with tutoring creative writers. To this end, I seek answers to the following research questions:

1. What are writing center tutors' attitudes towards tutoring creative writers?
2. To what degree do different background factors influence writing center tutors' attitudes towards tutoring creative writers?
3. What concerns do writing center tutors have about tutoring creative writers?

Answering these questions is important for writing center theory and pedagogy because it is a critical step in understanding the nuances of how tutors approach tutoring creative writing, whether and how their approaches are influenced by various factors, and whether they have any concerns with tutoring this specific type of writing. Worth noting, the current study, a partial replication of Cassorla, differs from the stated study in at least three ways: 1. it uses a nonparametric test to examine whether and how experience in tutoring creative writers affects tutors' attitudinal responses, 2. it runs associational statistics to investigate whether there is a relationship between tutors' levels of confidence in tutoring poetry, fiction, creative non-fiction writing and their background factors – frequency of reading and writing creative writing, years of creative writing instruction received, years of tutoring in the writing centers, frequency of tutoring creative writers,<sup>1</sup> and 3. it brings tutors' voices into light, enabling us to hear their concerns.

## Methods

### Participants

Using a convenience sampling method, I contacted thirty writing center directors via email after generating a list of available writing centers with director contact information on the university writing center websites. I asked the directors to forward the email which had an invitation letter and an anonymous link to a Qualtrics survey to tutors working at their writing centers. Thirty-two ( $N=32$ ) writing center tutors participated in the survey at the end of data collection procedure.<sup>2</sup> Due to the anonymity of the data set, we do not know how many institutions the participants came from;<sup>3</sup> however, we know that at least four writing center directors responded that they agreed to forward the survey to tutors who worked at their writing centers. All of the tutors were first language (L1) English speakers. Twenty-one tutors identified as female, 10 tutors identified as male, and one tutor identified as other. Twenty-two tutors were aged between 18 and 24, five were between 25 and 34, one was between 45 and 54, and four were 55 and over. Twenty-three tutors were undergraduates, six were postgraduates with four being masters and two being doctoral students, and three were faculty and/or administrative staff. The peer tutors were enrolled in a variety of majors including English, screenwriting, professional and technical writing, psychology, Middle Eastern studies, speech-language pathology, criminology, accounting, neuroscience, mathematics, biology, and biochemistry. Eleven tutors reported that they had less than one-year tutoring experience, 13 tutors had one or two years of tutoring experience, four tutors had three or four years of tutoring experience, and four tutors had more than five years of tutoring experience. The majority of tutors ( $N=22$ , 69%) reported that they had experience in tutoring creative writers. Three tutors reported that they have tutored creative writers one or two times, 10 tutors have tutored creative writers three to five times, two tutors have tutored creative writers six or seven times, and seven tutors have tutored creative writers eight or more times. Types of creative writing that tutors have tutored in writing centers included poetry, fiction, creative non-fiction, as well as video game and screenplay writing.

### Instrument

I designed an online survey with self-report scales to collect data in this study (see Appendix A). The survey included two sections. The first section intended to measure tutors' attitudes towards tutoring creative writers. It comprised nine statements, two multiple-

choice questions, and an open-ended question. Participants responded on a 5-point Likert-scale in order to reflect their levels of agreement on the statements. The specific instruction for participants to rate the statements was: "Please think for a second about tutoring a creative writer who needs help with their poetry, fiction (short story, novel, screenplay, drama), or creative non-fiction (autobiography, memoir, personal essay). Read the statements below and select the option that best reflects your level of agreement on each statement". The second section addressed demographic background of the participants. The survey was workshopped and validated with a group of researchers in the field of Composition and Applied Linguistics before being distributed to the participants. Although the survey did not force the participants to answer all the questions, there weren't any missing values which made it possible to generate reliable analysis.

### Data Analysis

Figure 1 in Appendix B illustrates the analytical procedures used to answer the research questions in this study.

To answer the first research question, descriptive statistics were measured for the 5-point Likert-scale items through Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) program. To answer the second research question, two statistical tests were run. First, a Mann-Whitney U test was conducted to see whether and how having experience in tutoring creative writers influenced tutors' attitudinal responses.<sup>4</sup> Second, a Spearman rho test was computed to measure the relationship between tutors' levels of confidence in tutoring creative writers and different background factors.<sup>5</sup> To answer the final research question, participants' qualitative responses were thematically coded.

## Results

This section documents the results organized by research questions.

### *What are writing center tutors' attitudes towards tutoring creative writers?*

Descriptive analysis was conducted to measure tutors' attitudes towards tutoring creative writers. Table 1 (see Appendix B) presents the means, medians, variances, standard deviations, and minimum and maximum scores for reported levels of agreement on the attitude items.

For each attitude statement, a Mean score was calculated based on the respondents' rating on a scale of 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). In these

results, the Mean scores varied from as low as 2.41 to as high as 4.62. The Mean distribution of the items were interpreted rounding the Mean score to the nearest whole number. For example, while 3.25 would be 3 (neither agree nor disagree), 3.75 would be 4 (somewhat agree). Based on a reading of the table in this way, descriptive analysis results indicated that tutors were undecided whether creative writer tutors should tutor creative writers ( $M=3.40$ ) and whether they can use the same tutoring methods in tutoring creative and non-creative writing ( $M=3.34$ ). Tutors somewhat disagreed that tutoring creative writing is more difficult than tutoring non-creative writing ( $M=2.41$ ). Tutors ranked highest confidence in tutoring fiction writing ( $M=4.62$ ), followed by creative non-fiction ( $M=4.50$ ) and poetry writing ( $M=3.25$ ). With respect to the need for specialized training, they ranked highest poetry writing ( $M=3.75$ ), followed by creative non-fiction ( $M=3.00$ ) and fiction writing ( $M=2.93$ ).

Apart from the scale items, two multiple-choice questions addressed tutors' attitudes towards tutoring creative writers:

1. Do you think writing centers should tutor creative writers?, and
2. Do you think tutors need specialized training to tutor creative writers?

On a 5-point Likert-scale ranging from "1 – definitely not" to "5 – definitely yes", 25 tutors (78%) reported that writing centers should definitely tutor creative writers and six tutors (19%) said "probably yes", while one tutor (3%) said "probably not". In response to the second question, 18 tutors (56%) reported that tutors need specialized training to tutor creative writers. Ten tutors (32%) remained neutral, three tutors (9%) wrote that tutors probably don't need specialized training, and one tutor (3%) reported that tutors definitely don't need specialized training to tutor creative writers. A Mann-Whitney U Test was used to compare tutors who had experience working with creative writers to those who did not for their attitudes towards the need for specialized training to tutor creative writers. No significant difference was observed between the two groups of tutors,  $U=82.0$ ,  $p=.132$ .

### *To what degree do different background factors influence writing center tutors' attitudes towards tutoring creative writers?*

A Mann-Whitney U Test was selected to see the influence of experience with tutoring creative writers on tutor attitudes. Table 2 (see Appendix B) presents the mean ranks, sum of ranks, U values, and p values of Mann-Whitney U test comparisons made between tutors who have and don't have experience in tutoring creative writers in writing centers. The groups represent

tutors who responded “yes” and tutors who responded “no” to the dichotomous question “Have you ever tutored creative writers in a writing center?”

As seen in the results, tutors were uncertain whether they can use the same tutoring methods when tutoring creative and other types of writing. However, further analysis showed that tutors’ experience in tutoring creative writers influenced their attitudes. A Mann-Whitney U test indicated that the attitude towards using the same tutoring methods when tutoring creative and other types of writing was greater for tutors who have tutored creative writers ( $Mdn=4$ ) than for tutors who haven’t ( $Mdn=2$ ),  $U=62.5$ ,  $p=.042$ . In other words, tutors with experience tended to agree, while tutors without experience tended to remain neutral that general tutoring methods apply to tutoring creative writers. While the inexperienced tutors’ neutrality is not surprising considering that they were not knowledgeable enough to make an informed choice, experienced tutors’ perspectives lend support to the literature promoting that tutoring creative writing is no different from tutoring any other type of writing (Pobo). This mediates against the literature discussing that the needs of creative writers differ from those of the typical writing center clients, therefore the tutoring methods (Hime and Mowrer; LeBlanc). The Mann-Whitney U test also revealed that the attitude towards tutoring creative writing to be more difficult than tutoring other types of writing was greater for tutors who have not tutored creative writers ( $Mdn=3$ ) than for tutors who have ( $Mdn=2$ ),  $U=60.0$ ,  $p=.050$ . These results suggest that as tutors gain experience in tutoring this particular genre of writing, they develop a sense of authority and power and become more confident in working with creative writers. However, when they lack the experience, they remain undecided about the difficulty of the task.

To assess the degree of correlations between tutors’ confidence in tutoring creative writers and different background factors, Spearman rho test was computed because the data on input variables were ordinal. Table 3 (see Appendix B) presents the Spearman rho correlations measuring variables related to tutors’ levels of confidence in tutoring poetry writing and background factors.

To investigate if there was a statistically significant association between tutors’ confidence levels in tutoring poetry writing and background factors, the Spearman rho statistic was calculated. There was a significant positive correlation between tutors’ levels of confidence in tutoring poetry writing and frequency of reading poetry ( $r=.39$ ,  $p=.024$ ), frequency of writing poetry ( $r=.41$ ,  $p=.017$ ), years of creative writing instruction received ( $r=.40$ ,  $p=.021$ ), years of tutoring experience

( $r=.50$ ,  $p=.003$ ), frequency of tutoring creative writers in writing centers ( $r=.51$ ,  $p=.003$ ).

Table 4 (see Appendix B) presents the Spearman rho correlations measuring variables related to tutors’ levels of confidence in tutoring fiction writing and background factors.

To investigate if there was a statistically significant association between tutors’ confidence levels in tutoring fiction writing and background factors, the Spearman rho statistic was calculated. There was a significant positive correlation between tutors’ levels of confidence in tutoring fiction writing and frequency of reading fiction ( $r=.40$ ,  $p=.021$ ), years of tutoring experience ( $r=.42$ ,  $p=.015$ ), frequency of tutoring creative writers in writing centers ( $r=.41$ ,  $p=.020$ ).

Table 5 (see Appendix B) presents the Spearman rho correlations measuring variables related to tutors’ levels of confidence in tutoring creative non-fiction writing and background factors.

To investigate if there was a statistically significant association between tutors’ confidence levels in tutoring creative non-fiction writing and background factors, the Spearman rho statistic was calculated. There was a significant positive correlation between tutors’ levels of confidence in tutoring creative non-fiction writing and years of tutoring experience ( $r=.46$ ,  $p=.007$ ), frequency of tutoring creative writers in writing centers ( $r=.39$ ,  $p=.026$ ).

#### *What concerns do writing center tutors have about tutoring creative writers?*

In the survey, the participants were asked an optional open-ended question: “What are, **if any**, your concerns with tutoring creative writers?” Of the total number of survey respondents ( $N=32$ ), 27 tutors (84%) answered this question. A breakdown of the collected responses revealed five themes:

1. While the tutors demonstrated diversity in their concerns with tutoring creative writers, many (33%) reached an agreement over genre unfamiliarity as a major issue in tutoring creative writers. In talking about the role of genre knowledge in tutoring, one tutor said, “if a tutor is unaware of genre conventions, or is completely unfamiliar with creative writing, they may lead writers astray when giving advice”. Another tutor opined:

Creative writing is unlike the typical class assignments we see in the center because it lacks clear conventions of the genre. When helping a student with a research paper, opinion article, or rhetorical analysis, I can rely on my knowledge of that genre and its typical requirements. With

creative writing, there are inherently fewer boundaries and guidelines. While this is a great chance for a writer to explore their written voice, it can leave a tutor wondering how to advise them.

2. Focusing attention on how creative writing is personal, several tutors (26%) discussed the challenges of tutoring such writing. While one tutor pointed to the affective issues saying, “creative writing is often much more personal and writers may be more vulnerable”, another expressed the pedagogical difficulty that can be experienced in such work and wrote that “creative writing is subjective and it’s difficult to say what’s right or wrong”. One other tutor further described the difficulty of such work:

It can be hard to offer advice to individuals who are working on creative pieces because creative pieces are such a product of the individual. Sometimes there is no objective way of making creative work better and that makes tutoring hard.

3. Emphasizing the importance of specialized training for tutoring various types of writing, some tutors (15%) observed that creative writing did not often appear in the agenda of tutor training and staff meetings in the writing center. A tutor suggested that “it helps for tutors to get specialized training for many genres/disciplines, not just creative writing”. Elaborating on that issue, another tutor remarked:

Writing centers tend to focus the training given to their tutors on traditional essays and that is what a lot of experienced tutors have seen the most of in their actual work. Because of this lack of exposure, tutors are likely to be unfamiliar with the peculiarities of creative writing.

4. Even when the training issue is resolved, in the view of some tutors (11%), it may not be sufficient enough to prepare tutors for the instances of creativity due to the fact of creative writing being uncommon in the writing center. To illustrate, a tutor said, “theory and training are good, but a lack of consistent interaction with creative writers hinders my ability to grow and adapt my methods”. Sharing this view, another tutor reported, “I don’t see many creative writers, so there’s not a lot of exposure to creative writing. Thus, there’s not a lot of opportunities to develop specific skills in tutoring creative writers.”

5. For a few tutors (11%), the lack of clear assignment guidelines came up to be a major problem in tutoring creative writers. Describing the problem in detail, a tutor said:

In many cases, tutees have a writing prompt or assignment direction that they need to follow from a class/teacher to complete the assignment. However, in some cases, students come to the writing center for help on their creative writing, which is merely a hobby for them and not for a class. They want to illicit or showcase more emotion or description in their writing and for some tutors, an assignment with no particular requirement can be a unique challenge because the props of an assignment sometimes steers the direction for the tutor in terms of how they want to go about assisting or aiding the student’s writing.

6. There were also practical concerns about tutoring creative writers, as one of the responses went:

My first thought is length. It may not be possible to critique a whole fiction or non-fiction piece in just one session. If it’s an excerpt from a longer work, the tutor may get caught up asking questions that have been covered in the parts the tutor hasn’t read.

## Discussion and Implications

More than half of the tutors in this study believed that they need specialized training for tutoring creative writing. Tutors rated poetry the highest and fiction the lowest in terms of the need for specialized training probably because they were least confident in tutoring poetry and most confident in tutoring fiction writing. These results align with previous research (Cassorla) and raise important questions to ponder. What causes tutors to have less confidence in tutoring poetry compared to tutoring fiction and creative non-fiction writing? While answering this question is beyond the scope of this study, to provide more explanatory analysis, I looked into the data and found statistically significant relationships between tutors’ confidence in tutoring poetry and different background factors such as reading and writing poetry. The present correlations suggest that Pobo’s observation that “many readers of ‘creative’ work, if they are not creative writers themselves, feel it is often difficult to discuss such work with that writer” (5) relies on the creative writing genre that is being discussed. It might hold true for situations in which tutors work with poetry writers because, as this study indicates, self-identification as a poetry writer reinforces confidence in tutoring poetry. However, tutors’ fiction and creative non-fiction writer identities do not influence their confidence in tutoring these genres. In other words, tutors do not need to be fiction or creative non-fiction writers themselves to feel confident in tutoring these creative writing genres. This implies the

need for more in-depth analysis of the assumptions, reasons, experiences, and insights which might be critical to understand the differences in attitudes toward various types of creative writing.

The results shared above lead us to the ever-unfolding debate over generalist vs. specialist tutors in writing center scholarship. A handful of empirical studies examining the influence of disciplinary expertise on tutoring sessions found that tutors' familiarity with the conventions of the discipline leads to more effective sessions with more focused and useful feedback (Dinitz and Harrington; Kiedaisch and Dinitz; Mackiewicz). However, the general conception is that although expertise permits specialist tutors to apply their knowledge of writing in the discipline when assisting writers with discipline specific course assignments, it is more attainable and desirable to equip generalist tutors with skills to work with writers from an array of disciplines. Likewise, while I recognize that specialist tutors can offer discipline-specific writing support at the centers, my approach to the debate over generalist vs. specialist tutors is far from a dichotomous view. I neither argue for having creative writers tutor their peers nor suggest that if writing center directors train "tutors to be good facilitators, to use questioning to help students clarify their ideas, and to guide students through the writing process, they could help almost any student on almost any paper" (Kiedaisch and Dinitz 63). Instead, I argue for what Kristin Walker called a "middle ground between the poles of generalist and specialist" (28), and I consider the tutors' neutrality, regardless of experience, on the role of expertise in tutoring creative writers as a gesture of their position in the middle ground as well.

The question that needs an answer is how tutors can respond to the needs of writers working on assignments from an array of disciplines, including creative writing. Although research shows that specialist tutors with disciplinary expertise could conduct more productive tutoring sessions (Dinitz and Harrington; Mackiewicz), we must remember that it is not logistically practical to pair writers from diverse backgrounds with tutors in the same discipline in the centers that welcome drop-in students. Whereas this concern is certainly sound, we cannot ignore the limitations of generalist tutors in their ability to counsel writers on discipline-specific papers (Kiedaisch and Dinitz). Both approaches, therefore, have certain drawbacks that make us question their value to writing center practice. An alternative consideration would be to offer specialized training as part of the typical writing center training, which is what the tutors in this study wished to receive in order to tutor creative writing. However, considering the very

heavy agenda of tutor training meetings, it would be utopian to cover each and every writing situation that might be encountered in a tutoring session. How could we expect peer tutors then to better address the needs of writers from diverse disciplines, writing in a variety of genres?

#### *Incorporate Genre Awareness Pedagogy into Tutor Training*

As discussed by several writing center scholars in previous research (Gordon; Walker), a genre theory can help transcend the traditional debate over generalist vs. specialist tutors because it "provides 'generalists' and 'specialists' with a tool to analyze discipline-specific discourse" (Walker 28). Along the same line, I hereby argue for going beyond the dualist approach to tutoring and applying genre theory to writing center practice to reinforce tutors' abilities to accommodate writers from unfamiliar disciplines. As found in the qualitative analysis results, the tutors in this study were most concerned about their unfamiliarity with the conventions of creative writing genres. Teaching genre awareness might help tutors feel more prepared to work with a variety of unfamiliar genres including creative writing. Should tutors be taught genre awareness in tutor training sessions, they can develop their understanding of the rhetorical nature of genres and to act purposefully in diverse tutoring situations that they will encounter in the center. In her relatively recent book chapter on genre pedagogies, Amy Devitt argues for teaching genre awareness as a way to mitigate issues with teaching particular genres, which is associated with reinforcing formulaic writing. Devitt suggests that "genre awareness pedagogy treats genres as meaningful social actions, with formal features as the visible traces of shared perceptions. Analyzing the contexts and features of a new genre provides an inroad to understanding all genres" (152). To foster tutors' skills to understand contextually any genre that they might tutor, writing center specialists can consider the adaptation of genre awareness pedagogy to tutor training.

#### *Facilitate Opportunities for Improvisation in Tutor Training*

While a strong understanding of genres can provide tutors with access to strategies of helping writers work through various rhetorical situations, the challenge for all tutors is to handle diverse range of writer backgrounds, practices, and experiences with writing. This indicates that it is time to revisit Sherwood's argument for training the tutor as the artist. By recognizing the artistic aspects of tutoring, tutors can "learn to cope with and embrace surprise, to spontaneously meet unexpected circumstances, to improvise appropriate and effective help for writers, and

to remain open to what researchers call “flow” experiences” (Sherwood 53). While it would be unrealistic for writing center directors to prepare tutors for all the quandaries and situations that they might encounter in the center, an achievable task would be to use improvisation in training tutors as artists who can trust their intuitions to make decisions in their tutoring work and learn to embrace the unexpected. As Steve Sherwood remarked,

by incorporating practice tutorials and improvisational exercises into training, we can give tutors some preliminary (and safe) experience with unusual and challenging situations. Such stage-managed experiences may, in a limited way, help to prepare them for the real thing – and provide a foundation on which to build their own techniques and philosophies of tutoring (65).

When tutors understand the act of tutoring as an act of art, they will find the courage they need to take risks in their work of tutoring. A key to cultivating tutors’ artistic abilities, improvisation brings pedagogical benefits to training tutors for varied tutoring situations. Bringing together genre awareness pedagogy and improvisational practices in tutor training programs can generate effective conversations of tutoring and enrich writing center pedagogy, theory, and work. These implications for tutor training have value as they can help address concerns related to tutoring unfamiliar genres including creative writing in the writing center.

## Limitations

As with all empirical inquiries, this study has its limitations. One limitation of the study is the potential self-selection bias as I recognize that those who had experience in tutoring creative writers were more inclined to take the survey. Due to this limitation, this study could only draw speculative conclusions about tutors’ general approaches to tutoring creative writing genres because the participant sample may not be representative of most centers. It is also possible to assume the impact of demographics on the attitudinal outcomes. For instance, considering the role of experience in shaping tutors’ attitudes, postgraduate and faculty tutors may have different orientations toward tutoring creative writing than undergraduate tutors, the analysis of which would be undependable because the small number of postgraduate (N=6) and faculty (N=3) standing tutors made it impractical to compare these groups. Furthermore, the current study surveys a small number of participants (N=32) which decreases the generalizability of the results. However, despite the small sample size, the study offers insights on writing

center tutors’ attitudes toward tutoring creative writers and draws significant correlations between tutor attitudes and different background factors. Moreover, the dearth of research on tutoring creative writers enhances the value of this study despite its sampling limitation because the study offers a way of investigating tutor attitudes toward tutoring creative writers in the writing centers. Another limitation of the study is that it focuses on tutoring poetry, fiction, and creative non-fiction writing. It does not include other forms of creative writing such as songs, video games, screenplays, etc. which were reported among the types of creative writing that tutors encountered in their writing centers. Consequently, while this study covers poetry, fiction, and non-fiction, it does not establish results related to tutoring an inclusive range of creative writing genres.

## Future Research

To move forward with tutoring creative writing, I suggest that more research be done to address the limitations of the current study. For instance, further research that draws on larger sample populations would address the small sample-size limitation and produce more valid generalizations. To have more confidence in study results, it is important that writing center researchers carry out replication studies in different contexts with different tutors. As discussed by Dana Driscoll and Sherry Perdue replication is critical in writing center research because if “several writing centers conduct the same study and learn the same thing by replicating each other’s work in their unique settings, we can say with some certainty that this concept can be applied to writing centers more broadly” (124). Besides taking on replication research, future studies might include a broader set of creative writing genres in their examination of tutor attitudes. Empirical inquiry into what motivates creative writers to visit the writing centers, what type of concerns they raise, and what type of suggestions tutors make in tutorials can shed light to the nature of interactions taking place between writing center tutors and creative writers. More research is needed to provide insights into occasions when tutorials include talking about a piece of creative writing such as poetry, fiction, non-fiction writing, etc., in light of which implications can be drawn to develop strategies that tutors can use when working with creative writers.

The results rendered from the analysis of the data answered the research questions that were asked in the current study. However, they raised new questions that should be answered for a better understanding of the issues discussed here. What are writing center tutors’ lived experiences with tutoring creative writers? What



types of resources do tutors rely on when tutoring creative writers? Which approaches are useful in tutoring creative writers? How do tutors contribute to the development of creative writing skills? For what purposes do creative writers visit the writing centers? How do tutors and creative writers negotiate creativity in writing center tutorials? What kinds of conversations take place in such tutoring sessions? Are creative writers satisfied with the help they receive at the writing centers? How do writing centers prepare tutors to support creative writers? I hope that this research will encourage the writing center community to explore the nuances of these questions and the implications that they suggest in order to move forward building effective pedagogies and practices in the center.

#### Notes

1. The variable “experience in tutoring creative writers” may sound closely connected to the variable “frequency of tutoring creative writers” however the former categorizes participants into two groups by experience (with experience/without experience) whereas the latter quantifies the level of experience in tutoring the target population. Such quantification is conducive to computing the nonparametric associational statistics because a Spearman Rho test assumes that “data on both variables are at least ordinal” (Morgan et al. 149).
2. I collected all the data from participants in accordance with and under the supervision of Indiana University of Pennsylvania’s IRB board.
3. I acknowledge that the survey is problematic in that it does not provide information about the institutional context that the participants came from. Such information is crucial to reveal the representativeness of the tutors across institutions. I recommend adding a background question to the survey in order to address this limitation in future replication studies, if any.
4. There are several statistical methods to compare two groups of participants (in this study, the two groups refer to tutors with and without experience in tutoring creative writers). For instance, I could have used a T-test to compare experienced and inexperienced tutors’ attitudes towards tutoring creative writers, if I found that the data on tutors’ responses to attitude items were normally distributed. However, with the finding of non-normally distributed data, I employed a Mann-Whitney U test, an alternative to the T-test when the data set follows a non-normal distribution.

5. A Spearman rho test serves to compute associational statistics for ordinal data (Morgan et al.). In this study, I measured Spearman rho to examine the correlations between tutors’ levels of confidence in tutoring creative writers and different background factors. While there are various associational statistics, the Spearman rho correlation was used in this study due to the ordinal nature of the data set (e.g. frequency of reading creative writing varies from 0 to 8 or more times monthly, from low to high). The Spearman rho test differs from the Mann-Whitney U test in that it is used to establish relationships between variables, rather than compare two groups or samples. The former indicates the extent to which two variables move in the same direction (e.g. tutors’ confidence in tutoring poetry increases as their frequency of reading poetry increases, or vice versa), whereas the latter indicates the degree of difference in means between two groups or samples. In other words, Spearman rho is a test of sameness, whereas Mann-Whitney U calculation is a test of difference.

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## Appendix A: Survey

### Section 1: Attitude Items

Please think for a second about tutoring a creative writer who needs help with their poetry, fiction (short story, novel, screenplay, drama), or creative non-fiction (autobiography, memoir, personal essay). Read the statements below and select the option that best reflects your level of agreement on each statement.

1=Strongly disagree, 2=Somewhat disagree, 3=Neither agree nor disagree, 4=Somewhat agree,  
5=Strongly agree

- a. I can use the same tutoring methods when I tutor creative and other types of writing.
- b. Tutors who are creative writers themselves should tutor creative writers.
- c. Tutoring creative writing is more difficult than tutoring other types of writing.

Please respond to the following statement using the scale below.

1=Strongly disagree, 2=Somewhat disagree, 3=Neither agree nor disagree, 4=Somewhat agree,  
5=Strongly agree

I feel confident that I can tutor...

- a. poetry writing
- b. fiction writing
- c. creative non-fiction writing

Please respond to the following statement using the scale below.

1=Strongly disagree, 2=Somewhat disagree, 3=Neither agree nor disagree, 4=Somewhat agree,  
5=Strongly agree

I need specialized training for tutoring ...

- a. poetry writing
- b. fiction writing

c. creative non-fiction writing

Do you think writing centers should tutor creative writers?

- ☐ Definitely not
- ☐ Probably not
- ☐ Might or might not
- ☐ Probably yes
- ☐ Definitely yes

Do you think tutors need specialized training to tutor creative writers?

- ☐ Definitely not
- ☐ Probably not
- ☐ Might or might not
- ☐ Probably yes
- ☐ Definitely yes

In the text box below, please answer the following question.

What are, **if any**, your concerns with tutoring creative writers?

## **Section 2: Background**

What gender do you identify with?

- ☐ Female
- ☐ Male
- ☐ Other

Which category below includes your age?

- ☐ 18-24
- ☐ 25-34
- ☐ 35-44
- ☐ 45-54
- ☐ 55 and over

What is your first language?

If you have a second/foreign language, please specify it.

What is your major?

I am a/an ...

- ☐ Undergraduate student
- ☐ Master's student
- ☐ Doctoral student
- ☐ Faculty member
- ☐ Other (please specify)

How many years of creative writing instruction have you received in your education?

- ☐ None
- ☐ Less than 1 year
- ☐ 1-2 years
- ☐ 3-4 years
- ☐ More than 5 years

Please respond to the following question using the scale below.

a = 0 , b = 1-2, c = 3-5, d = 6-7, e = 8 or more

How many times each month do you read ...

- a. poetry?
- b. fiction?
- c. creative non-fiction?

Please respond to the following question using the scale below.

a = 0 , b = 1-2, c = 3-5, d = 6-7, e = 8 or more

How many times each month do you write ...

- a. poetry?
- b. fiction?
- c. creative non-fiction?

How long have you been tutoring in a writing center?

- ☐ Less than 1 year
- ☐ 1-2 years
- ☐ 3-4 years
- ☐ 5 years
- ☐ More than 5 years

What training have you had to tutor creative writers? Please select all that apply.

- ☐ None
- ☐ Regular writing center training
- ☐ Specialized training for tutoring creative writers
- ☐ Workshops
- ☐ Other (please specify)

Have you ever tutored creative writers in a writing center?

- ☐ Yes
- ☐ No

How many times have you tutored creative writers in a writing center?

- ☐ Never
- ☐ 1-2 times
- ☐ 3-5 times
- ☐ 6-7 times
- ☐ 8 or more times

What kind of creative writers have you tutored? Please select all that apply?

- ☐ Poets
- ☐ Fiction writers
- ☐ Creative non-fiction writers
- ☐ Other (please specify)

## Appendix B: Figures and Tables

Figure 1. Methods of analysis

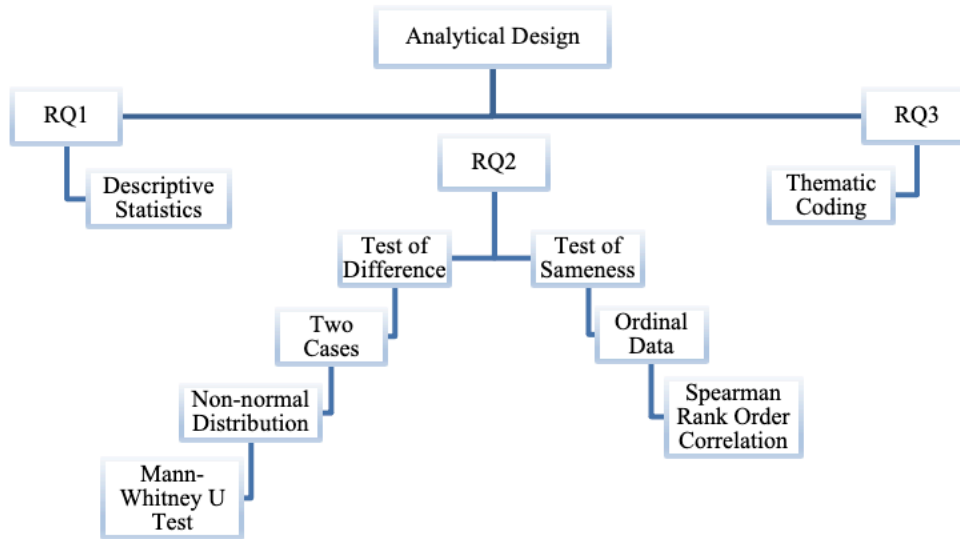


Table 1: Descriptive Statistics for Tutors' Attitudes towards Tutoring Creative Writers (N=32)

Item	Mean	Mdn	Var	SD	Min	Max
Tutors who are creative writers themselves should tutor creative writers.	3.40	4.00	1.539	1.24069	1.00	5.00
I can use the same tutoring methods when I tutor creative and other types of writing.	3.34	4.00	1.394	1.18074	2.00	5.00
Tutoring creative writing is more difficult than tutoring other types of writing.	2.41	2.00	1.585	1.25895	1.00	5.00
I feel confident that I can tutor...						
...fiction writing	4.62	5.00	.242	.49187	4.00	5.00
...creative non-fiction writing	4.50	5.00	.839	.91581	1.00	5.00
...poetry writing	3.25	4.00	2.129	1.45912	1.00	5.00
I need specialized training to tutor...						
...poetry writing	3.75	4.00	1.161	1.07763	1.00	5.00
...creative non-fiction writing	3.00	3.00	1.226	1.10716	1.00	5.00
...fiction writing	2.93	3.00	1.415	1.18967	1.00	5.00

*Note.* Scale: 1 – Strongly disagree, 2 – Somewhat disagree, 3 – Neither agree nor disagree, 4 – Somewhat agree, 5 – Strongly agree.



Table 2: Mann-Whitney U Test Comparisons (N=32, Yes=22, No=10)

Item	Grouping	Mean Rank	Sum of Ranks	<i>U</i>	<i>p</i>
I can use the same tutoring methods when I tutor creative and other types of writing.	Yes	18.66	410.50	62.500	.042*
	No	11.75	117.50		
Tutors who are creative writers themselves should tutor creative writers.	Yes	15.77	347.00	94.000	.500
	No	18.10	181.00		
Tutoring creative writing is more difficult than tutoring other types of writing.	Yes	13.86	291.00	60.000	.050*
	No	20.50	205.00		

Note. \* Statistically significant difference ( $p \leq .05$ ).

Table 3: Correlations between Tutors' Levels of Confidence in Tutoring Poetry Writing and Background Factors (N=32)

Background Factors	Confidence in Tutoring Poetry Writing
Frequency of reading poetry	Spearman Rho Correlation
	.397*
Frequency of writing poetry	Sig. (2-tailed)
	.024
Years of creative writing instruction	Spearman Rho Correlation
	.418*
Years of tutoring	Sig. (2-tailed)
	.017
Frequency of tutoring creative writers	Spearman Rho Correlation
	.406*
	Sig. (2-tailed)
	.021
	Spearman Rho Correlation
	.507**
	Sig. (2-tailed)
	.003
	Spearman Rho Correlation
	.512**
	Sig. (2-tailed)
	.003

Notes. 1. \* Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed), 2. \*\* Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

Table 4: Correlations between Tutors' Levels of Confidence in Tutoring Fiction Writing and Background Factors (N=32)

Background Factors	Confidence in Tutoring Fiction Writing
Frequency of reading fiction	Spearman Rho Correlation
	.406*
Frequency of writing fiction	Sig. (2-tailed)
	.021
Years of creative writing instruction	Spearman Rho Correlation
	.150
Years of tutoring	Sig. (2-tailed)
	.413
Frequency of tutoring creative writers	Spearman Rho Correlation
	.161
	Sig. (2-tailed)
	.378
	Spearman Rho Correlation
	.426*
	Sig. (2-tailed)
	.015
	Spearman Rho Correlation
	.410*
	Sig. (2-tailed)
	.020

Note. \* Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

Table 5: Correlations between Tutors' Levels of Confidence in Tutoring Creative Non-Fiction Writing and Background Factors (N=32)

Background Factors		Confidence in Tutoring Creative Non-Fiction Writing
Frequency of reading creative non-fiction	Spearman Rho Correlation	.243
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.181
Frequency of writing creative non-fiction	Spearman Rho Correlation	.034
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.852
Years of creative writing instruction	Spearman Rho Correlation	.123
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.501
Years of tutoring	Spearman Rho Correlation	.466**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.007
Frequency of tutoring creative writers	Spearman Rho Correlation	.393*
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.026

Notes. 1. \* Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed), 2. \*\* Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).